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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH ENVIRONMENT MINISTER

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In her introductory call on Environment Minister Gediminas Kazlauskas, Ambassador Derse said that the USG is committed to reaching a legally binding agreement on climate change and heard that Lithuania, while largely in sync with the EU position in Copenhagen, does not want an agreement so restrictive that it would hamper the country's economic development. Kazlauskas also said that ministry priorities include moving ahead on a program to renovate apartment buildings to make them more energy efficient, simplifying land-use requirements to improve the investment climate, improving waste-management and water-treatment practices, and expanding use of green-energy technologies. End summary.

Climate change

¶2. (C) On the first day of the climate-change conference in Copenhagen, Ambassador Derse had her initial meeting with Lithuania's Environment Minister, Gediminas Kazlauskas, in Vilnius. She outlined recent changes in USG policy on climate issues, stressing that President Obama is committed to achieving a legally binding international agreement on climate change and enumerating some of the regulatory changes the United States has made to decrease greenhouse-gas emissions. "President Obama has said we will engage. This is a big change in our policy regarding climate change, and I hope our European partners recognize that," she said.

¶3. (C) Kazlauskas replied that many in Lithuania and Europe were concerned that the Obama administration, by taking on climate change and health-care reform simultaneously, might not be able to fulfill its promises on climate change. He also said that while Lithuania was supporting the EU position in Copenhagen, it and other eastern European countries have some differences with the older EU member states. "These old member states have a different level of economic development," he said. "Lithuania wants to keep some possibility to reach another level of economic development, and we'd like to have some allowance for that."

¶4. (C) Under the provisions of the Kyoto climate-change pact, Lithuania has emissions credits that it can sell to other countries. Lithuanian law says revenues from such sales must be used for energy and environment projects, but some members of the parliament have told us recently that they would like to see that money used to ease the country's current budget woes. Kazlauskas and Vice Minister Aleksandras Spruogas told the Ambassador that they saw virtually no chance of the law being changed to allow that.

Other priorities

¶5. (C) Kazlauskas said that while the Copenhagen conference and the GOL's budget debate are keeping everybody at the ministry busy these days, another priority for the coming year is continuation of a program to renovate apartment buildings to increase their energy efficiency. That program

will allow for savings by cutting energy use, help Lithuania to decrease its energy dependence on Russia, and put construction workers and other laborers back to work during the economic slump.

¶6. (C) Another ministry priority is to simplify the procedures investors must follow for getting approval for land use. Those permissions can take up to two years, and the ministry, which has responsibility for land-use issues, wants to cut that "dramatically," Kazlauskas said. The Ambassador welcomed the minister's words, saying that American businesses have told her that one of the biggest bars to investing in Lithuania was the cumbersome procedure for acquiring land.

¶7. (C) Kazlauskas also said that Lithuania wants to improve waste-management and water-treatment practices, and welcomed the Ambassador's offer to find ways for Lithuania and the United States to cooperate in that area. "I read just a few weeks ago that there are some very good technologies coming from the U.S. on that," he said.

¶8. (C) Although the Ministry of Energy takes the lead on renewable energy, Kazlauskas said, his ministry also follows those developments. He said private businesses are working on some wind-power projects off the Baltic Sea coast, but are looking for new sources of equipment. "In Europe there are not enough possibilities to procure all that we need," he said. "Now companies are looking in China, because the prices are very different from Europe and the quality is enough." The Ambassador said she would be very interested in exploring any possibilities for American firms to work with Lithuania on wind power or any other clean and green energy projects.

DERSE